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The survival of the left

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BIOLOGISTS EXPLAIN how organisms adapt to their physical environment, but ideologues also adapt to their social environment. The most fundamental fact about the ideas of the political left is that they do not work. Therefore we should not be surprised to find the left concentrated in institutions where ideas do not have to work in order to survive.

The academic world is the natural habitat of half-baked ideas, except for those fields in which there are decisive tests, such as science, mathematics, engineering, medicine;and athletics. In all these fields, in their differing ways, there comes a time when you must either put up or shut up. It should not be surprising that all of these fields are notable exceptions to the complete domination by the left on campuses across the country.

In the humanities, for example, the test of deconstructionism is not whether it can produce any tangible results but whether it remains in vogue. So long as it does, professors skilled in its verbal sleight-of-hand can expect to continue to receive six-figure salaries.

You might think that the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe would be considered a decisive failure for Marxism, but academic Marxists in America are utterly undaunted. Their paychecks and their tenure are unaffected. Their theories continue to flourish in the classrooms and their journals continue to litter the library shelves.

Socialism in general has a record of failure so blatant that only an intellectual could ignore or evade it. Even countries that were once more prosperous than their neighbors have found themselves much poorer than their neighbors after just one generation of socialistic policies. Whether these neighboring countries were Ghana and the Ivory Coast or Burma and Thailand, it has been the same story around the world.

Discredited elsewhere, the nostrums of the left live on in public television.

Nor is economic failure the worst of it. The millions slaughtered by Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot for political reasons are an even grimmer reality.

People who live and work in a world where there is a business bottom line, an athletic scoreboard, a military battlefield or life-and-death surgery may find it hard to fully appreciate the difference between that kind of world and one in which the only decisive test is whether your colleagues like what you are saying.

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Academia is only one of the places where wholly subjective criteria rule;and where leftists predominate. Endowed institutions such as foundations and museums likewise often face no test other than what like-minded people find "exciting" and what enables those who run these institutions to get the heady feeling that they are "making a difference." The same is true of cultural institutions supported involuntarily by the taxpayers, such as the Smithsonian or the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.

Taxpayer-supported "public" radio and television are similarly insulated from reality and similarly dominated by the left, not only in the United States but in other countries as well. All the nostrums of the left that have brought hunger to millions in countries which used to have surplus food to export, all the pretty words and ugly realities that have caused millions more to flee the lands of their birth, these nostrums live on in public television;much like old classic movies with familiar lines that the audience of aficionados can recite along with the characters on the screen.

These endowed and insulated institutions, often full of contempt for the values of American society and Western civilization, are not the only bastions of the left counter-culture. So are Hollywood and Broadway. Although show biz faces the financial need to get an audience, the truth of what they portray is hardly crucial. If they can make it punchy and sexy, then those who complain about historical inaccuracies and ideological bias can be dismissed as irrelevant pedants. Why are leftists able to crowd out other kinds of people from these places? Because those who are willing to subject themselves to the test of reality, whether as a businessman in the marketplace or as a surgeon in an operating room, have many other places in which to work and live. They do not need special sheltered niches in which to hide and to cherish their precious notions.

Darwinian adaptation to environment applies not only to nature but also to society. Just as you don't find eagles living in the ocean or fish living on mountain tops, so you don't find leftists concentrated where their ideas have to stand the test of performance. Dr. Thomas Sowell is an economist and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, Calif.

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